

LETTERS

Dear Editor:

We come today not to honor Caesar but to bury him or, in this case, certification in the Army Acquisition Corps.

Several years ago, after numerous onerous articles appeared in major newspapers and magazines concerning military acquisition blunders, Congress mandated that the Armed Forces develop a group of professional acquisition specialists. These specialists would be a group of select, trained, certified individuals who would enable the Armed Forces to procure materiel in a professional, efficient manner. This would guarantee that the government would get superior value for the ever-shrinking financial resources.

Certification requirements were developed and training programs designed to produce these highly competent professionals. It was impressed upon employees how critical this certification and training was for career development and advancement. For the first few years, the programs proceeded smoothly and this highly trained corps began to spread out in the ranks of public service. There were even some positive results.

Then, as with all admirably conceived government programs, things began to go awry. Acquisition education professionals who deemed that certain courses required a minimum of 3 weeks to teach were told that 2 weeks would have to suffice and, later, 1 week. All this was done in the name of cost cutting.

I don't want to sound totally negative. All the cost-cutting initiatives were not ill conceived. A concerted and admirable effort was made to turn the introductory courses into Web-based self-study courses. This was an excellent decision to preserve and maximize scarce resources to dedicate to the more advanced learning opportunities.

Now bureaucracy has endeavored to stick its hands into this noble process. Where certification once required completing the required courses and obtaining endorsement from the proper superiors (that the experience requirements were met), we must now traverse the paper trail to receive the needed certification. Papers must be filled out, records obtained, initials (not signatures) acquired, documentation of complete work history of related experience, etc., etc., etc., all must be routed through the proper channels.

I know I sound facetious and condescending here, and I mean to. I am no stranger to education. I came to the government with two bachelor's degrees (engineering and economics) and obtained a master's while employed—paid for, I might add, by myself and attended at night because “it wasn't job-related.” (While I dispute this considering that my job entails, and still does, making investment decisions for the military. I have also been told, after applying to another training program (the Master of Science/Industry Work Study) that I was already more educated than the Army desired.)

I know this sounds like a case of sour grapes, but it all boils down to this: the government mandated an admirable program, designed a comprehensive course of study, and attached a prestigious reward to completing the requirements. What we are now left with is a mandated program, with a gutted curriculum and a bureaucratic nightmare to obtaining the rewards of completing the requirements.

One of the nice things about college and university courses and degrees is that the requirements are pretty straightforward. Take the required classes, do the work, pass, and you get the degree. There were no courses cut from a full term to a third of a term and no need to document course completion to unrelated authorities. And a simple audit of your records can prove that you have obtained the proper course credits.

To the Acquisition Overlords who decree, “You must get certified!,” I respond—why bother? I'd rather go back to college.

Yours truly,
Curtis G. Becker
Clifton Park, NY 12065-5120

Response:

Dear Mr. Becker:

The certification process you refer to is the original process whereby your supervisor, the first Senior Executive Service (SES) individual, or the General Officer in your chain of command could complete your certification. Changes were made to that process to improve it, not to make it more difficult. Because many of the supervisors, SES personnel, and General Officers were not certified in the same career field in which you were seeking certification, or were possibly not even in the Acquisition Corps, many certifications were completed erroneously. These erroneous certifications, while not intentional, diminished the validity of those that were certified correctly.

In conjunction with the Functional Chiefs for each career program, the Army Acquisition Corps established a new process whereby individuals seeking certification would be certified by someone in the same career field who has achieved Level III certification themselves. These certifying officials were selected by the Functional Chief responsible for certification in each career field and provided specific guidance on the process. This new procedure brings more discipline into the process and goes a long way to ensure the validity of each certification identified on Acquisition Career Record Briefs (ACRBs).

The process is actually quite simple. Individuals seeking certification must only provide their ACRB and a copy of their work experience (resume or DA Form 2302) to their acquisition career manager (ACM). The ACM coordinates with the appropriate certifying official and the finalized certification is returned to the individual.

Certification policy and procedures are outlined on the Director for Acquisition Career Management (DACM) home page at <http://dacm.sarda.army.mil/policy>. A list of ACMs can be found on that same home page at <http://dacm.sarda.army.mil/contacts>.

Sandy Long
Acting Deputy Director
Acquisition Career Management Office

Dear Editor:

I recently read LTC Patrick Forrestal's article titled "Army Astronauts Energize The NASA Mission." I found it to be exciting and really neat to see the Army and NASA working together through the astronaut program. My goal is to become a full-fledged astronaut after college—and the route I have always wanted to take is a military one. I am interested in LTC Forrestal's e-mail address or postal address so that I may write to him to inquire about the opportunities that the military offers for "wannabe" astronauts. Further, if your office has info that would be helpful concerning this matter, please e-mail it to me. Thank you!

Scott Jones

Army AL&T Response:

Dear Mr. Jones,

There are several ways to enter the astronaut program. Three types of crewmembers serve onboard the space shuttle: payload specialists, pilot astronauts (the shuttle commander is also a pilot), and mission specialists.

Payload specialists have a thorough knowledge of a particular shuttle's mission. They are usually neither NASA employees nor career astronauts. Becoming a payload specialist is not usually a career that can be easily planned. An individual must have the right skills and be in the right place at the right time. This career path also depends on what mission the shuttle will have 20 years from now. Setting one's sights on this position is not recommended.

Pilot astronauts are typically military fighter pilots (they must be jet pilots) who graduated from at least one test pilot school and have thousands of hours of flight time with many combat missions and distinguished flying crosses, etc. The bare minimum requirements are 1,000 hours of flight time and at least a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree in engineering, biological science, physical science, or mathematics. They also usually have some type of advanced degree in addition to a B.S.

Mission specialists are the most common type of astronaut. They are usually engineers and have at least a B.S. degree in engineering, biological science, physical science, or mathematics and a minimum of 3 years of technical work experience. The average mission specialist typically has at least one Ph.D. in a technical field and typically has some flight experience.

The Army astronaut (there are also Air Force, Navy, and other types) typically falls into one of the above categories but is not a NASA employee. Rather, an Army astronaut is assigned to his or her duty station through the Army chain of command, much like a transfer. Most Army astronauts are high-ranking officers (major or above) and qualify for the position based on one of the above categories. However, most military astronauts are fighter-jet test pilots. There are some helicopter pilots who are mission specialists. Every 2 years, the opportunity arises for an astronaut candidate to apply through

his or her own unit. Eligible applicants must have an advanced college degree (i.e., not engineering technology, but an actual engineering degree or a degree in physics, chemistry, etc.). Applicants must make sure that their supervisor states on his or her officer evaluation report or noncommissioned officer evaluation report that the best place for the applicant to serve the Army is as an Army astronaut. These reports actually contain a section where the senior rater or someone can suggest the best location for this individual within the Army.

An online NASA factsheet is available at <http://spaceflight.nasa.gov/shuttle/reference/factsheets/asselttrn.html>. This site has information on the astronaut application process and other requirements. The page also links to astronaut biographies.

The best way to become an astronaut is to build a great resume and keep applying yourself. Make sure that you select your career based on what you want to do in life and not because you think that it will help with the astronaut selection.

For more information on astronauts and the astronaut program, contact Lucy Lytwynsky in the Astronaut Appearances Office at lucy.lytwynsky1@jsc.nasa.gov, or call (281) 244-8857.

Dear Editor:

I have read the last two articles on contingency contracting ["Does The Army Need A Contingency Contracting MOS For NCOs?"; see September-October and November-December 2000 issues]. I am an NCO in the National Guard. I am also an excepted technician, which means I am a civilian wearing military clothing. During the day, I have a warrant of \$10 million. On the weekend drills, in military status, I can't purchase a thing.

We are always told that we need to be emulating industry and thinking out of the box, and MAJ Metts and MAJ Castrinos have done that and I compliment them, but I would suggest that they might even think a little further outside the box.

The DOD and OPM have strapped new educational requirements on to contract specialists. They must have both a degree and 24 hours of business training. This makes it hard for the people who are currently in the contracting field. The NCOs will be required to have the same credentials, which means it will be even harder to find NCOs that qualify.

I suggest that we reach for the stars and create a whole new career ladder that would take the NCO through to the officer corps. This would create incentives and challenges for those who are interested, but at the same time, it would create a very elite organization. I know that NCOs were given commissions as Warrant Officers based on their experience after Vietnam. And I know that if a comprehensive plan were put into action, a career plan could be devised that would include the

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ascension to the officer corps. This would, perhaps, solve another problem—the dwindling supply of Acquisition Corps officers.

As you see, this is only in the embryonic stage and a radical concept to some. But Army regulations already make allowances for direct commissions for procurement personnel. The problem with this regulation is that it does not take into account that a person must be a captain or higher to become a member of the Acquisition Corps and the direct commission is restricted to the rank of lieutenant, with age restrictions as well as others.

The National Guard is aging as is the regular Army. The world is very competitive and is drawing experi-

enced and government-educated people away at an alarming rate. We must be competitive if we are to be mission capable.

Please pass this e-mail on to the majors as food for thought.

Thanks
Mike Belovsky
Contracting Officer

Army AL&T Response: Thank you for your letter. It has been forwarded to Majors Metts and Castrinos.

ACQUISITION REFORM

FORSCOM Conducts First Reverse Auction

The Third Corps and Fort Hood Contracting Command recently conducted the Army Forces Command's (FORSCOM's) first reverse auction, using the software available on the U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Command's (CECOM's) Interagency Business Opportunities Page Web site. Fort Hood used this innovative e-commerce tool to obtain a 10.67-percent savings over the estimated product price and significant quality increases.

The requirement was for 40 Pentium III, 650 MHz, 8-GB hard-drive-capacity CPUs, each with a 250-MB Zip drive and optical mouse, estimated to cost \$1,500 each. Subsequently, 40 Gateway Pentium III, 733 MHz, 15-GB hard-drive CPUs, each with a 250-MB Zip drive, a 1-MB video card, an Internet keyboard, and an optical mouse, were purchased at a final cost of \$1,340 each. All minimum requirements were met, and exceeded in many cases.

Fort Hood conducted a private auction with four small-business General Services Administration (GSA) vendors. The vendors were selected through a market research process. To keep a level playing field, each company was classified as either a small or small-

disadvantaged business. Fort Hood spent approximately 6 days preparing for the reverse auction and made the delivery order award on the day the auction was completed. Offerors were informally debriefed the day after the award.

Fort Hood was satisfied with the reverse auction and plans to hold other auctions for future requirements that are acceptable for the auctioning process. In addition, Fort Hood foresees using reverse auction procedures to augment other procurement methods, such as a two-step sealed bid process. During the first step, technical requirements are negotiated with the offerors. In the second step, a reverse auction is conducted to determine the final contract price, and ultimately, the contract winner.

CECOM has placed this new software on the Army Single Face to Industry Web site (<http://acquisition.army.mil.default.htm>) so the entire Army can use it. Many companies that offer only low-bid reverse auction software charge a percentage of sales, whereas CECOM's program is available to the entire Army at no cost.